

INTRODUCTION TO ETHICS AND POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

ESSAY REQUIREMENTS

Writing philosophy essays is one of the best ways to improve your ability to do philosophy. Doing philosophy is one of the best ways to improve your ability to think about complex issues clearly and systematically. Thinking about complex issues clearly and systematically is one of the best ways to make good decisions, whether in your professional lives, your personal lives, or as citizens.

Writing a good philosophy essay is a distinctive skill. Forget what you have learned about writing essays. We need no colourful introductions, no historical stage-setting, no quotations from famous thinkers. All we want are clearly stated theses, which you will explain in your own words, with your own examples; arguments for these theses, which you will explain in your own words, with your own examples; and objections to these arguments, explained in your own words, with your own examples. Anything that is not a thesis, an argument, an objection, an explanation of one of these, or an example of one of these: take it out of your paper.

Unless it is signposting. Tell us what you are doing to do before you do it. This applies to the whole paper. You should start with something that sounds like the conclusion to your paper. "I will argue for P. I will argue for this by arguing that if Q then P, and that Q." You should also start paragraphs like this. If in one paragraph you will consider an objection to Q, then start the paragraph as follows. "One might object to Q that R, and that if R then not Q. But I think that the first premise of this objection is false...."

The assignments for this class are designed to make it as easy as possible for you to learn how to write as clearly, carefully, and simply as this.

An Example of An Argument, and Two Kinds of Objections

Let's start by introducing you to arguments and objections to arguments. An argument is a consideration or set of considerations (the premise or premises) that supports some conclusion. Here is an example of an argument:

Premise 1: A principle is metaphysically acceptable only if it is causally efficacious.
Premise 2: It is not the case that moral principles are causally efficacious.
Conclusion: Therefore moral principles are not metaphysically acceptable.

An argument is *valid* if there is no possible situation in which its premises are true and its conclusion is false. An argument may be valid even though its premises are actually false. An argument is *sound* if it is valid and its premises are actually true.

An objection to an argument either consist in an argument to the effect that one of the premises of the argument is false, or that the premises of the argument do not validly support the conclusion.

Here is an objection to the truth of the premises of the argument under consideration. Suppose you want to object to premise two. Here is an argument for your conclusion that premise two of the original argument is false:

Premise 1: If a principle is metaphysically acceptable only if it is causally efficacious, then there are no metaphysically acceptable mathematical principles.
Premise 2: There is at least one metaphysically acceptable mathematical principle.
Conclusion: Therefore it is not the case that a principle is metaphysically acceptable only if it is causally efficacious.

In order to defend this objection, you would need to motivate your two premises. To motivate premise one you would need to argue that mathematical axioms are not causally efficacious, and that they are principles in the relevant sense. To motivate premise two you would need to argue that there is at least one metaphysically acceptable mathematical principle. To do this satisfactorily you would need to defend some conditions of acceptability and argue that at least one mathematical principle meets these conditions. Alternative arguments with the same structure would maintain that logical principles, or epistemic principles, or methodological principles, meet these conditions.

The original argument we are considering is valid. There is no possible situation in which its premises are true and its conclusion is false. (Its logical form is: P only if Q, not Q, therefore not P.) But suppose that the first premise of the argument we are considering had been different. Right now it maintains that a principle is metaphysically acceptable only if it is causally efficacious. But suppose instead that it had begun as follows:

Premise 2: It is not the case that moral principles are causally efficacious.
Premise 3: A principle is metaphysically acceptable if it is causally efficacious.
Conclusion: Therefore moral principles are not metaphysically acceptable.

This argument is not valid. There is a possible situation in which premises 2 and 3 are true but the conclusion is not true. For Premise 3 only tells that causally efficacious principles are metaphysically acceptable. It doesn't rule out the possibility that some

other kinds of principles are metaphysically acceptable. Premise 3 is consistent with the thesis that *explanatory* principles are metaphysically acceptable – where a principle may be explanatory even if it is not causally efficacious. (For instance, the principle that equals added to equals yield equals.) Indeed, Premise 3 is consistent with the principle that *any kind of principle you like* is metaphysically acceptable. If that principle is true, then moral principles are certainly metaphysically acceptable. So there *are* situations in which the premises of this argument are true while the conclusion is false, so this argument is not valid.

Finally, a warning. You do not need to indent your arguments in premise/conclusion form in the *final version* of your essay. It is probably better if you don't, since we would rather that the finished versions of your essays consisted in renderings of these arguments into ordinary prose. You just need to *know* what the premises and the conclusion are. This will enable you to write in a clear and careful way about these arguments. You also do not have to use any of the technical vocabulary introduced in this document in your essays. You don't need to talk about validity or soundness for example. In fact, it is probably better if you do not, since we want you to be expressing ideas clearly in your own words. But I do want you to have these *concepts*. They will help you to think more carefully about arguing well.

ESSAY ONE: AN OBJECTION

Hopefully you are getting a feel for this. For your first essay, you will first need to figure out which thesis you are going to be objecting to. Perhaps it is the thesis that the moral facts obtain in virtue of facts about the will of a divine creator. Your first essay will have the following title:

Title: An Objection to the Thesis that ... (e.g. moral facts obtain in virtue of facts about the will of a divine creator).

Then you will structure your essay as follows:

Introductory paragraph: "I will object to the thesis that.... I will do so by arguing that if this thesis is true, then (*where this is some implication, perhaps that morality would be arbitrary in some particular way*). I will argue that this implication is implausible (*perhaps because of the results that it would lead to; perhaps because it provide intuitively the wrong kinds of moral explanation*). Therefore the thesis that ... is false.

Section One: Clarify the thesis that you are objecting to, with your own examples.

Section Two: Clarify and motivate that if this thesis is true, then some implication follows, with your own examples.

Section Three: Object to this implication, with your own examples.

Section Four: If you have time, consider an objection to your objection.

ESSAY TWO: AN ARGUMENT

Here I want you to go even slower. Take your time to really get a difficult piece of philosophy expressed as clearly as you possibly can.

Here's one example for how this might go. I'll use P, Q, R, etc. as placeholders for different theses. Don't use letters or acronyms in your essays. Always write out the theses that you are discussing.

Introductory paragraph: "I will argue for Q. I will do so by arguing that P, and that if P then Q. I'll consider one objection to P, namely that R. I'll argue that R is false. Therefore Q."

Section One: Clarify Q, with your own examples.

Section Two: Clarify and motivate P, with your own examples.

Section Three: Argue that if P then Q, with your own examples (perhaps these are examples in which it might have seemed that P and not Q, but in which really when you think carefully you see that this is not possible).

Section Four: If you have time, consider an objection.

ESSAY THREE: YOUR ARGUMENT

For the final paper, you have the opportunity to express your own ideas. Try to think during the term about what interests you most. Chat to us about your ideas. We'll encourage you to be creative. But you will still be graded on the basis of the clarity, carefulness, and straightforwardness of your arguments, and their quality *as* arguments. Don't just tell us what you think. Tell us why we should think what you think. Then consider how we would object, and provide replies to these objections.